

FEAR AND GREAT JOY
A Sermon for Easter
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Columbia, Tennessee
March 23, 2008

Matthew 28:1-10

The action in this story takes place in a cemetery, which is a strange thing when you think about it. A cemetery is a place of grief, a place of sadness, but not a place of action. A cemetery is a place where nothing happens. But in the 28th chapter of Matthew, the action takes place in a cemetery.

We seem to make trips to cemeteries with increasing frequency as we age. And we know how it goes. The solemn cortege leaves the funeral home or the church and travels slowly through the streets. Not even stoplights impede the progress to the cemetery. Most of the time you are in one of the following cars, friends of the deceased and family, but not ourselves consumed with grief. But sometimes you are in the first family car. It is your loved one who has died, your heart that is broken.

It was with that deep grief that the women came to the tomb on the first day of the week. They came, according to Matthew, to see the tomb. Two days earlier they had watched as Jesus had died. They had cringed as the nails were pulled from lifeless hands and feet and the weight of Jesus' body was lowered from the cross. They had followed in tears as the body was borne to the tomb. And now they were returning to see if everything was all right. They wanted to see the tomb.

“Somewhere along the path to the cemetery, however, they left one world and entered another. Without even know that they had crossed the border, they left the old world, . . . and entered the startling and breathtaking world of resurrection and life.”¹ The place where nothing happens became the place where a whole new world began. There was an

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 322.

earthquake, and an angel came and rolled away the stone. That stone had been sealed at the instruction of Pontius Pilate, and guards had been placed in front of the grave. The religious leaders had been worried that someone might steal the body and begin a rumor that Jesus had risen. So Pilate had used all his power to see that such a thing did not happen.

But something there is that does not like a stone in front of the tomb of Jesus. The angel rolled away the stone, and sat on it. It's a nice detail. This huge stone, that was intended to keep Jesus safely dead in the tomb, now was moved as if it had all the weight of a Nerf Ball. And the angel sat on it, thumbing his nose at all the power of Pilate that tries to keep things safe and secure and under control. There's nothing under control in this grave yard.

For their part, the guards started quaking themselves and became like dead men. The ones who were charged with keeping Jesus dead became as the dead themselves.

Everything has changed. In an instant the world has changed. The cemetery cannot hold the dead any longer, for there is one who has risen from the dead, the first fruits of all those who will rise. No wonder then that the women return with "fear and great joy."

Fear and great joy. The joy we can understand—Jesus is alive! But fear? What is there to cause fear? If we ponder it we can understand it. Everything we know about the old world is undone. What more predictable place is there than a cemetery? But if now even that place is unpredictable, then no place on earth is safe. All the old arrangements are undone. All human attempts to make things secure are overthrown. The women know that the resurrection of Jesus changes things beyond what they can imagine. No wonder they are filled with fear.

In many ways our world is driven by fear. There are terrorists out there that do not wish us well, and we are fearful. There are soldiers fighting a war, some of them known to us, and we are fearful that they might endure harm. The investment bank Bear Stearns collapsed last week, another indicator of a shaky economy—what's it going to do to my investments? The commercial comes on TV for Sylvan Learning Center. The message is that either you enroll your child in their program or your little one will end up a juvenile delinquent. It preys on parental fear. There's been a lot of illness out there; what if it touches me or someone I love? And lest all other fearful impulses fail, the income tax filing deadline is only three weeks away.

Fear is all around and through our world. It is so much a part of life that after awhile we learn to live with it, as if this world and its fears are almost normal.

And then Jesus rises from the dead. None of the old fears have power anymore. If death is overcome, what is there to fear in our world? “The old world, where hope is in constant danger, and might makes right, where peace has little chance, and the rich get richer, where the weak all eventually suffer under some Pontius Pilate or other, and people hatch murderous plots, and dead people stay dead,”² now has become the new world of hope and joy and newness.

Preacher and writer Tom Long puts well the joy and fear of resurrection: “The wonderful news of Easter is that Jesus is alive, and the terrible news of Easter is also that Jesus is alive, because nothing is nailed down anymore.”³

No wonder the angel says to the women “Fear not.” And later, when they encounter the risen Jesus, he speaks the same word to them: “Fear not.” Do you want to tell the gospel message in two words? Here it is: Fear not. Fear not the power of death. Fear not the powers of this world that intimidate us to keep us in line. Fear not the times of embarrassment and humiliation and shame that we try so hard to avoid. Fear not the times of despair, for hope is here. Fear not times of want, for your heavenly Father knows what you need. Fear not working for peace, for “blessed are the peacemakers.” Fear not. The resurrection means that the final word in our world is not death, but life, not despair, but joy.

And it all starts in the cemetery.

Sometimes when we go to the cemetery we are in one of the trailing cars, friends of those who grieve. Sometimes we’re in that first family car, filled with grief when someone dies. And for all of us the day will come when we will be in the first car, the hearse.

Karl Barth puts it with his characteristic bluntness:

Some day we shall be buried. Some day a company of [people] will proceed out to a churchyard and lower a coffin and everyone will go home; but one will not come back, and that will be me. The seal of death will be that they will bury me as a thing that is superfluous and disturbing in the land of the living.⁴

² Long, p. 322.

³ Long, p. 323.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 117-118.

Does such a statement cause you fear? It shouldn't. Because now that final indignity, that final death, is not the end. Death no longer has dominion. "Because of the resurrection, we genuinely and profoundly do not need to be afraid of anything—not anything in life and not anything in death."⁵

With the women you can come to the cemetery. You can come see the place where he lay. But the angel tells it: "He is not here; he has been raised." Do not look for this Jesus among the dead. He is out there in the world, waiting to encounter you.

If you feel a mixture of fear and great joy at that prospect, then you've got it about right. †

⁵ Long, p. 323, slightly altered.